

Black Hills forest to use \$500K from forest service to fight pine beetles

The Black Hills National Forest will use half a million dollars from the United States Forest Service to continue its efforts to fight the mountain pine beetle epidemic.

The funds will come through the regional office for the federal forest service as an additional budget allocation, said Robert Lee, deputy director of renewable resources.

The Black Hills National Forest has completed an environmental plan for 200,000 acres, said Craig Bobzien, forest supervisor for the BHNF. The acres of forest that have been infested with pine beetle, or have been identified as a high-risk area, have been prioritized.

The service will use the additional \$500,000 to mark and thin about 2,500 acres, he said.

"We'll just work our way down the list," he said.

The funding will help, but it is a small piece of a much larger need.

"In terms of the total scale, we need another \$6 to \$7 million to address this," he said. "We're not at the point in saying it doesn't matter. It does matter."

With the new funding, the service will be able to focus on two areas, he said. The first will be marking and thinning smaller stands of trees. Those trees will more than likely be marked, cut down and chunked into smaller pieces, which dries out the tree and kills the beetles.

The other areas will include large, contiguous stands of trees that have been infested with the beetle.

Lee said the federal forest service has made efforts to send any additional funding to the Black Hills for pine beetle mitigation anytime there has been additional funding for timber management.

"We were trying to scrape the books," he said. "We're certainly going to support that effort."

The Region 2 office of the forest service covers Kansas, Colorado, parts of Wyoming, Nebraska and South Dakota.

"The Black Hills epidemic is pretty much on the rise, so we're just trying to give them all the support we can," Lee said.

Corps raises repair cost estimate for Pierre-area causeway

PIERRE — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has raised the cost estimate for repair of the LaFramboise Island Causeway to \$2 million as a precautionary measure.

KCCR radio reports that the original cost estimate of \$1 million was raised after corps officials reviewed the project earlier this month. Oahe Project Manager Eric Stasch says the funding request for the causeway continues to be highly considered by the corps. He says not much can be done until Congress appropriates more funding for repair work.

This year's flood did extensive damage to the corps-owned causeway, which links Steamboat Park to the LaFramboise Island. The damage buckled concrete, eroded the dirt foundation and washed away several hundred feet of the causeway.

Officials hope to get repair work started next year.

Target shooters, hunters could be barred from federal lands

Gun owners have long used public lands for target shooting and hunting, but according to the U.S. News and World Report, that may soon be changing.

Under new rules drafted by the U.S. Department of the Interior, at the behest of the Obama administration, target shooting and hunting could be banned on millions of acres of federally owned land.

According to the report, the Interior Department is concerned that those who use the land for activities such as hiking and walking their dogs are sometimes alarmed when they hear shots fired.

The magazine report says that the key phrased in the new policy says that if an officer determines that a site on Bureau of Land Management lands used for recreational shooting is creating a disturbance, littering, creating a risk or any number of other issues, it could be closed to recreational shooting.

It's actually a pretty opened-ended statement allowing officers a lot of leeway to close lands to shooters.

A number of conservationists and hunting groups, including the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, National Wildlife Foundation, Cabela's and Ducks Unlimited, are lining up to fight the proposed rules.

n The Pennsylvania Game Commission and Department of Conservation and Natural Resources maintain a number of roads in public forests that are open to hunters during the fall.

Before assuming those roads are open, hunters are urged to check in advance to assure the road is open.

Some roads have been altered recently because of gas drilling activities, road construction, timber harvesting and flooding.

A listing of open roads, effective dates and district office telephone numbers can be found online at <http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/deer/openroads/index.htm>; or by calling state forest district offices.

n A barn owl has been sighted on a Washington-area farm, marking the first time the rare bird has been seen in southwestern Pennsylvania in nearly a decade.

The bird was identified by band as being from northeast Ohio.

Once common in many parts of Pennsylvania - though not necessarily here - barn owl numbers have declined for a number reasons, most notably because there are now fewer farms.

According to the Pennsylvania Game Commission, there are now more than 135 nesting sites in the state, most in the south central and southeastern parts of the state.

Kansas governor hosts pheasant hunt

OAKLEY, Kan. | On a day that Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback set aside to showcase the state's pheasant hunting, he took matters into his own hands.

Participating in the Kansas Governor's Ringneck Classic — an event that Brownback dreamed up to draw national attention to western Kansas and its bountiful pheasants — the governor was the star of his own show on Saturday.

Not long after wading into the cover on private land near Oakley, he walked in behind a dog on point, flushed a cackling rooster and connected on his shot. Two hours later, he had his limit of four pheasants and was crowing about the state's excellent hunting.

“Even in a year when our overall pheasant population is down, there are places where there are a lot of birds,” Brownback said. “And this is one of them.

“This is beautiful country for pheasants, and we want people to know about it.”

Brownback wasn't the only one in his party doing some advertising. By the time the group had worked two fields, they had eight birds down, three of which were taken by the governor.

Brownback then moved to another party and hunted with his celebrity guests, golf champion Tom Watson and Royals Hall of Famer George Brett.

It was there that Brownback finished his limit as he squeezed off a shot at a rooster pheasant streaking across the gray sky.

At the other end of the line, Brett also was pulling the trigger. As he walked down a lane cut in the middle of shoulder-high cover, he flushed two pheasants and shot them both.

That type of action is what Brownback envisioned when he made the establishment of a governor's pheasant hunt one of his campaign pledges when he was running for office.

"I've seen lots of states do a better job of promoting their hunting and fishing than we do," Brownback said. "Lots of hunters fly over us without really realizing what we have to offer.

"Well, I've long believed that our best tourist attraction is the outdoors. We just have to do a better job of promoting it.

"That's what this event is all about. I want to draw attention to our hunting and western Kansas and in turn help the economy out here."

Why Oakley, a town of 2,200? Brownback said the town met three criteria.

"It's located right in the middle of the great bird zone, it has hotel space and it has community leadership," he said.

The Kansas Governor's Ringneck Classic centered on sponsors, who then brought in teams of hunters. The participants ranged from sports legends, such as Watson and Brett, to soldiers who had just returned from the Middle East.

"This is a great event," said Watson, an avid hunter who chases everything from ducks to quail. "There are a lot of pheasants out here, and this hunt will help get the word out."

Organizers of the hunt couldn't have said it better. Raelene Keller, one of the main organizers, said that the Kansas Governor's Ringneck Classic will bring \$40,000 in direct economic impact to the area. But she added, "It could be worth a lot more just in terms of the exposure we'll get."

For Brownback, the hunt, which he plans to make an annual event, is a perfect fit. He was brought up on a farm and has fond memories of hunting quail with his family.

"When we started out, I was the bird dog," he said. "They would send me out down the middle of the hedgerow, and I'd get the birds up.

"When I got old enough, my dad let me carry a single-shot shotgun around. But it was one of those where you had to pull the hammer back, so I didn't get many shots off."

On Saturday, Brownback started off with a shotgun that had been presented to him by the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, a firearm that was later auctioned off at the awards dinner Saturday night.

He finished his limit with an old gun that his grandfather had once used.

"My grandfather ran a grocery store in Osawatomie," Brownback said. "One day, he traded someone their groceries for this gun.

"I still use it to this day. It's a sentimental thing for me."

More elk migrating to Wyoming Elk Refuge

JACKSON -- More elk have been making their way to the National Elk Refuge.

Last week only one radio-collared bull elk had been spotted on the south end of the Jackson refuge and another bull elk on adjacent Teton National Forest lands.

Small groups of elk have now been moving into the refuge. However, refuge biologist Eric Cole said the number of elk is still much lower than normal for this time of the year.

He attributed the late elk movement to a spring runoff which provided abundant forage for the elk and the late arrival of significant snow.

Fish and Wildlife hatcheries boost Wyoming economy

CASPER, Wyo. — Fish stocked in Wyoming from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hatcheries contributed to \$24 million worth of economic activity in 2010, according to an agency report.

More than 2 million agency fish were stocked in Wyoming waters, resulting in an estimated 361,738 angling days and over \$15 million in retail sales.

The report takes into account economic activity related to Fish and Wildlife Service hatcheries only.

Jim Caudill, economics chief for the agency, noted that an earlier study pegged 2006 total retail expenditures associated with freshwater fishing in Wyoming at \$500 million.

Fish and Wildlife Service stocking and related fishing in Wyoming resulted in 227 jobs and job income of more than \$7 million, he said.

"It's not the economic driver obviously, but it's not insignificant," Caudill said.

Caudill said the \$24 million industrial output figure takes into account the multiplier impacts of initial expenditures that arise from angling for fish stocked by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Larry Gamble, geographic supervisor for the fisheries program, said fish from Fish and Wildlife Service facilities in Wyoming are not stocked exclusively in local waters.

A Fish and Wildlife Service hatchery in one state often benefits many states, Gamble said. For example, rainbow trout eggs produced at a facility in Ennis, Mont., are shipped to three dozen states.

He said stocking decisions are made in close cooperation with state game and fish officials.

Two Fish and Wildlife Service hatcheries are located in Wyoming. The Saratoga National Fish Hatchery produces trout and trout eggs to fill needs across the U.S. Its broodstock trout species are lake, brown and rainbow trout.

The Saratoga hatchery includes 37 raceways and 16 tanks fed by springs and wells, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service website.

The Jackson National Fish Hatchery produces Snake River cutthroat trout for federal, state and tribal waters in Wyoming and Idaho. It produces more than 1 million eggs and 400,000 trout annually.

The Fish and Wildlife Service fisheries program, in association with state agencies and other conservation groups, contributes \$3.6 billion to the U.S. economy and supports 68,000 jobs, according to the agency.

The National Fish Hatchery System generates \$900 million in industrial output annually and \$550 million in retail sales.

Yellowstone cutthroats may benefit from Greybull River dam project

MEETEETSE, Wyo. -- An effort to reconnect Yellowstone cutthroat trout with their spawning grounds high in the mountains west of here is unfolding alongside a \$3.7 million dam project on the Greybull River.

The Upper Sunshine Diversion Dam Rehabilitation Project, now under construction 16 miles west of Meeteetse, marks a new collaboration among a number of organizations, including the Greybull Valley Irrigation District, Trout Unlimited and Wyoming Game and Fish.

Heavy equipment rumbled across the site last week as the Greybull River flowed through a temporary channel skirting the construction site. Crews worked in black, sticky mud, ready to endure the onset of winter while pouring concrete and setting rebar for the new dam.

While the project will help irrigate crops scattered across this arid region of Wyoming, a \$400,000 fish ladder will help Yellowstone cutthroat trout navigate the dam, long considered a major blockage in the river.

Biologists already have tagged fish in hopes of learning how successfully the cutthroat population uses the ladder when work wraps up next year and the headgates open for the first time.

"Those fish have to be able to move from their winter habitat to their spring spawning grounds," said Jason Burckhardt, the Cody region fisheries biologist with Wyoming Game and Fish.

"It used to be thought that fish spent most of their time in one place," Burckhardt said. "But we're learning now that these fish are actually pretty dynamic. They can cover quite a bit of county over a year's time to find the different habitat attributes they need to survive."

Swim for survival

The Greybull River and its high-elevation tributaries are considered among the last remaining strongholds for pure Yellowstone cutthroat in the region.

The shallow river runs a meandering path to the sagebrush flats in the Bighorn Basin from the high streams in the Absaroka Mountains rising to the west.

Over the past century, irrigation projects have carved up this and other regional rivers, diverting water into canals and reservoirs for irrigation.

Major blockages, like the Buffalo Bill Dam on the Shoshone River, and smaller diversion projects, like that on the Wood River not far from here, have made it impossible for cutthroat to navigate rivers and return to their spawning grounds at higher elevations.

The impact of such river obstacles was witnessed recently by Bob Cooke, construction superintendent for the Upper Sunshine Dam project.

Late one evening, as work was winding down for the day, Cooke watched as water from the diverted Greybull River roared over the spillway remaining from the old diversion dam.

"I was down there in the evening and the cutthroats were actually trying to rise up out of the river," Cooke said. "But they couldn't get up onto that first shelf.

"They can't rest in that spot -- it's too turbulent in there -- so they can't get over the next lift. But they were jumping up two or three feet while trying."

Steve Yekel, fisheries supervisor for the Cody district, said larger cutthroats can overcome some blockages in the river. Cutthroats famously navigate the LeHardy Rapids on the Yellowstone River in Yellowstone National Park to spawn each year.

But dams and rapids are different and many cutthroats have failed to return up the Greybull River after washing below the diversion dam at high flows.

For a fish that some argue belongs on the endangered species list, Yekel said attention was needed to help the cutthroats move upriver and complete their instinctual swim to native spawning waters.

Game and Fish, along with Trout Unlimited, helped come up with the \$400,000 needed to make the fish ladder project possible.

"They spend most of their time in the deeper pools in the lower watershed for winter habitat," Yekel said. "When the water starts warming up, they get the urge to run upstream and spawn in the smaller tributaries up high. But that's completely out of the picture if you've got a diversion in the way."

The fish ladder

Last week, the earth around the construction site rumbled under the weight of tractors, jackhammers and other machinery. A spider web of concrete forms and piles of rebar sat where the Greybull River flowed as recently as September, when work got under way.

Chris Knodel, project manager with States West Water Resources Corp., based in Buffalo, stepped down into the soggy construction site where, despite the best effort of engineers to keep the work site dry, the river lingered in pools and streams.

"This big slab here is the head gate for the irrigation district's canal," Knodel said. "This long stretch running behind that slab is the fore bay where the water will spill into."

It's the work taking place on the north side of the project that will most benefit Yellowstone trout and their chances to survive the shifts of climate change, warming streams, reduced summer flows and competition from other predatory fish.

At a glance, the fish ladder doesn't look like much -- a long arm of concrete following the contour of the river's main channel. Back in his workshop, Knodel flips through the ladder's blueprints and explains how a fish can "climb" the dam's 12-foot height.

"The ladder will have several steps in 6-inch increments," Knodel said. "Where the fish ladder ties into the downstream portion of the river, it'll be around 2 feet deep. The fish will progress up the ladder through each step."

The structure is designed to give dam operators the ability to change the water level within each step of the ladder.

Using stop logs, or wooden beams, they will raise each pool as needed to control the water's depth and help the fish navigate the ladder.

"I think the main criteria is to have at least 2 feet of water in each pool," Knodel said. "The fish will just use it as a ladder and climb up above the diversion dam. It allows them to avoid the restriction on the river."

The work comes as pleasing news to area anglers, who are fond of fishing for Yellowstone cutthroat along the Absaroka Front.

Ken Banks and his cousin, Ernest George, of Lovell, sat last week on the wind-scoured shores of Upper Sunshine Reservoir, just five miles from the where the dam project is taking place below on the Greybull River.

"Sometimes they'll bite in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon," said Banks, showing two cutthroats he'd caught that morning.

"Some of them are 20 inches long. In fact, we each caught a 21-incher. These are all cutts up here, and we love to come up here fishing."

Hog Wild

From New Hampshire Fish & Game's "Wildlife Journal" Magazine

They're big, hairy, hungry and hopefully not coming to a neighborhood near you. Today's free-ranging feral swine (*Sus scrofa*) are known by many names – wild pig, razorback, feral hog, Russian boar and piney-woods rooter among them. They are not native to North America and claim a varied ancestry that can be traced to swine brought by Spanish explorers, escaped domestic swine, Eurasian wild boar and hybrids of these three.

In the past few decades, feral swine have expanded their range in the United States, and have arguably become the most invasive and destructive large mammal species in North America. They have been labeled an ecological disaster, in large part because our ecosystems did not evolve with feral swine and therefore have not adapted to their damaging behavior. Feral swine also serve as vectors for a number of diseases and parasites that pose a threat to humans, livestock, wildlife and pets. Vehicle collisions are another concern because of the animals' dark coloring, low profile and nocturnal nature.

Historically, feral swine populations in New Hampshire have either been Eurasian wild boar or hybrids. Swine were first introduced by European settlers in the early 1500s; over time, it became commonplace to free-range these domestic pigs. Many years later, sport hunting operations imported European wild boar throughout the U.S. Today, we are left with a hybrid that has resulted from years of cross-breeding.

Although they are a relatively new phenomenon in the northern United States, we now have a confirmed feral swine population in New Hampshire that presents a unique management challenge. Reports of feral swine were documented as early as 1895. Damage complaints and sightings have been on the increase.

Breeding Machines

Feral swine have the greatest reproductive potential of any large mammal worldwide. They can breed any time of year and under optimal conditions, sows are bred at six months of age and may produce multiple litters in a given year (gestation is about 115 days), with each litter consisting of 3-13 piglets. Piglets are weaned at about three months of age. Adult males (boars) are often solitary outside of breeding season, but females (sows) live in groups (called "sounders") which typically consist of 2-3 adult sows, their piglets and sub-adult males and females from previous litters. Feral swine have the highest productivity of any ungulate (hoofed animal) in North America, with the ability to triple their population in a single year. They have a high survival rate because of a lack of natural predators and their ability to endure high hunting harvest rates.

Environmental Destruction

Feral swine are voracious omnivores and have documented negative impacts on native animals and plants. Although tubers, roots, grasses and other plant matter represent a majority of their diet, they will consume nearly anything they come across or catch, from carrion to invertebrates. Their varied menu includes soft and hard mast (berries, nuts, etc.), earthworms, insects, frogs, salamanders, lizards, snakes, small mammals, ground-nesting birds like wild turkey and grouse, and even white-tailed deer fawns. They can have a direct impact on threatened and endangered or sensitive species. In Florida, they have contributed to the decline of many listed species, including at least 22 plants and 4 amphibians, and have been linked to the destruction of up to 80% of sea turtle nests in some regions. Feral swine are fierce competitors and will out-compete native wildlife for food and forage, including acorns, which are an important and variable resource for white-tailed deer, wild turkey, black bear, ruffed grouse and other wildlife in New Hampshire.

It's easy to tell if feral swine have been in an area, because they leave behind obvious, unique sign. Their tracks are similar to those of deer, although they are rounder in overall shape and tend to be more splayed and blunt at the tips than deer tracks. The most common marker results from their aggressive rooting behavior. They use their snouts to uproot vegetation and earth in search of invertebrates, roots and tubers. Severity can range from superficial rooting of less than 6 inches deep to more extensive gouging 1-2 feet deep. Their rooting can cause substantial property damage in suburban communities, destroying lawns and landscape, backyard gardens, parks and golf courses. Areas rooted by feral swine look like they have been run over by a fleet of out-of-control Rototillers. Fences, roads and earthen dikes may be damaged. Swine also damage the landscape by creating wallows, which they lie in to cool off and get rid of external parasites. Trees can be damaged when feral swine rub on them to remove excess mud and parasites, and boars use their tusks to remove tree bark as a scent-marking behavior.

Feral swine destroy native habitat by rooting, trampling and wallowing. This causes soil erosion and runoff, leading to sedimentation in streams, ponds and lakes. They impact forest regeneration by rooting, trampling and devouring mast and seedlings. They damage wildlife plantings and food plots, and the disturbed soils they create favor growth of exotic plants. Besides humans, feral swine have been labeled the greatest vertebrate modifier of our natural communities.

Nationally, the destructive behavior of feral swine causes an estimated \$1.5 billion dollars in agricultural and environmental damage annually. Razorbacks consume and trample crops like corn and soybeans and damage pasture by rooting and creating wallows. They prey upon lambs, goats, newborn cattle and poultry. They can also stress livestock through harassment and food competition, as well as serving as a vector for disease transmission.

Disease Risk

Feral swine are known to carry as many as 30 diseases and 37 different parasites. Many of these are a risk to humans, livestock, wildlife and pets. Humans are susceptible to such diseases as brucellosis, leptospirosis, influenza viruses, toxoplasmosis, and trichinosis. In 2006, feral swine were implicated in the contamination of California spinach fields that infected hundreds of people with *E. coli*. Along with the human health risks, these disease threats pose a great concern to the multi-billion dollar U.S. livestock industry. They can carry livestock diseases such as foot and mouth disease and classical swine fever, both foreign animal diseases that have been eradicated from the United States; if reemerged, they could severely impact our livestock trade exports and result in billions lost. Some of these infectious diseases would be very difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate and likely would be amplified if established in feral swine populations.

Plan of Attack

Feral swine populations have expanded significantly across the U.S. over the past 20 years. Currently, an estimated 5 million animals inhabit 38 states, whereas in 1982 they were found in just 17 states. They are most prevalent in California, Texas and the southeastern states. While some increase in range is natural, much of the recent expansion is due to illegal and intentional introductions. In some instances, high-fenced hunting operations may have many miles of fence line that can be damaged by storms, neglect or even poachers looking to release animals. Along with escapes from domestic swine facilities, some rural backyard operations still free-range their domestic pigs. Natural range expansion and illegal introductions, coupled with the extreme adaptability of feral swine, fuel the continued spread of this destructive animal.

So what is being done to combat this problematic pest in New Hampshire? The U.S. Department of Agriculture/APHIS-Wildlife Services (WS) assists landowners in New Hampshire who have feral swine-related property damage through trapping and shooting of hogs. The WS New Hampshire Program also participates in the WS National Wildlife Disease Program's feral swine disease surveillance and monitoring efforts.

Nonlethal methods of feral swine control may include fencing or using guard animals to protect livestock or property. These are often more expensive and less practical than lethal methods. Trapping and shooting are the most effective and efficient means of controlling feral swine; this can include the use of corral, box and cage-style traps.

In certain situations, shooting over bait and regulated hunting (in states where it is legal) can be successful. Hunting is unlikely to control free-ranging feral swine populations, however. On average, hunting can remove 20% of a population annually, while population modeling suggests that maintaining a stable to decreasing feral swine population would require 50-70% annual removal. For an effective feral swine control program, an integrated approach is best – including trapping, shooting, fencing and public education.

Feral swine have no legal game status in New Hampshire, but are considered escaped private property and may only be hunted with permission of the property owner. Since 1949, feral swine have been defined in the state as animals "Running at Large" under RSA 467:3. Nationally, feral swine fall under a variety of legal classifications, from game species to escaped livestock, depending on the state. However, in most cases they are considered an invasive or exotic species.

At this time, feral swine populations in the northeastern United States appear to be relatively sparse. However, there are confirmed populations in New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. Several of our neighboring states are also suspected to have transient populations. It is important to control their numbers and expansion, or the significant ecological and economic problems associated with feral swine will soon become all too common in New Hampshire.

“It’s imperative that we prevent feral swine from becoming firmly established in our state,” warns N.H. Fish and Game wildlife biologist Mark Ellingwood. “Their devastating impacts on plant communities and sensitive habitats; their deleterious impacts on amphibians, reptiles, ground-nesting birds and other native wildlife; and their role as a significant potential disease vector to wildlife, make feral swine a major threat to a cornerstone of the ‘New Hampshire advantage’ – our cherished wildlife resources.”

Tony Musante is a wildlife biologist with USDA/APHIS-Wildlife Services, based in Concord, N.H. Parker Hall is Director of NH/VT USDA/APHIS-Wildlife Services.

D.C. in Quotes

- If hypocrisy were gold, the Capitol would be Fort Knox. *John McCain*
- It is perfectly American to be wrong. *Newt Gingrich*
- If you don’t want to work for a living, this is as good a job as any. *John F. Kennedy*
- You can lead a man to Congress, but you can’t make him think. *Milton Berle*
- I think the American public wants a solemn ass as president and I think I’ll go along with them. *Calvin Coolidge*
- My God! What is there in this place (Washington, DC) that a man should ever want to get into it? *James Garfield*
- My choice early in life was either to be a piano player in a whorehouse or a politician. And to tell the truth, there’s hardly any difference. *Harry S. Truman*